



Genesis and Human Stewardship of the Earth

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The first two chapters of Genesis contain teachings with profound relevance for ourselves and our world today. After creating Adam and Eve, G-d blesses them, saying "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."² What does it mean for humans to subdue the earth and have dominion over other creatures?

One of the central precepts of Rabbinic Judaism is that the Written Torah must be understood within the context of the 2,300 year-old rabbinic tradition (including the Midrash and other works) that interprets it. While on the surface the words of this verse appear to give people license to degrade and subdue the earth, the Oral tradition makes clear that a wholly different message is being conveyed.

The Midrash teaches, "Rabbi Chanina said, 'if he [the human being] merits it then [G-d says] have dominion, while if he does not merit, then [G-d says] he will be taken down.'³ This teaching links human dominion of creation to humanity's righteousness: if humanity merits through its righteousness, then it shall rule over nature. But if it does not merit because it does not act in an upright fashion, then humanity itself will descend and not be granted rulership over nature.

Another Midrash makes clear that part of human righteousness involves being stewards of the earth. The Midrash says that G-d showed Adam around the Garden of Eden and said, "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are — how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."⁴ Acting righteously thus involves treating the world with utmost respect; for this the human will merit dominion of creation.

Rabbi David Sears writes that the blessing to dominate "comprises a form of stewardship for which humanity is answerable to G-d. Both Talmudic and Kabbalistic sources state that it is forbidden to kill any creature unnecessarily, or to engage in wanton destruction of the Earth's resources... The divine mandate for man to dominate the natural world is a sacred trust, not a carte blanche for destructiveness."⁵

In the Torah, the order of domination is fish-birds-animals: "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz) explains that man has a greater ability to rule over land animals than birds (out of reach in the sky), and fish (out of reach and out of sight, in the sea).⁶ If humans do not merit, then not only will they not dominate the fish, which are harder to catch, but also the birds and animals, which are easier.

¹ The author would like to thank Evonne Marzouk for her helpful editorial comments.

² Genesis 1:28

³ Or, let others (the besasts) rule over him (footnote of Soncino translation) Midrash Genesis Raba (Vilna Edition), 8:12, translation by Soncino Press. The Maharal explains in Gur Aryeh to Genesis 1:26 that "the verse uses 'v'yirdu' for 'ruling,' from the root resh-dalet-heh, rather than the more common 'mashal,' so that it can be expounded as if it were from the root yud-resh-dalet, 'declining, degenerating,' as well." (From Artscroll Rashi Bereishit)

⁴ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

⁵ The Vision of Eden, Orot: Spring Valley, NY, 2003, p. 69-70

⁶ To Genesis 1:26

Yet a glaring contrast emerges between the Kli Yakar's 17th century description of the limited human capacity for domination of the animals, birds and fish of the natural world and what we know about the ability of contemporary society to dominate the land, air, and sea of planet earth.

For example, while the Kli Yakar emphasizes that fish are not visible to people, sonar, satellite data and the Global Positioning System (GPS) enable fishermen to effectively 'see' giant schools of fish with pinpoint accuracy. According to a study led by researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, these changes have contributed to a dramatic fall in fish populations in all of the world's oceans.

When human mastery grows such that we seriously deplete the numbers of a particular fish, our continued access to this fish quickly diminishes. Our lack of righteousness leads us to lose our domination of this resource in the long-term.

Rabbi Daniel Kohn links the blessing to subdue (kivshuha) in our verse with the Mishna's use of 'subdue' in the Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Avot), in which Ben Zoma teaches, "Who is strong? The person who subdues their inclinations." Spiritual discipline comprises true strength. A person must decide in their own life which desires to subdue and which desires to bring to realization.

Jewish tradition teaches us that we only merit the opportunity to rule the earth if we behave righteously. This includes the spiritual discipline to use our resources wisely, and subdue with a sense of moral responsibility. In our times, we have demonstrated our ability to subdue the earth. A central question facing humanity concerns whether we will exhibit the strength to rein in our desires. If we do not, we may be taken down by our lack of righteousness. May we summon the strength to conquer our short-term desires, live with righteousness, and merit an enlightened dominion of the planet G-d created.

This material was produced as part of the Jewcology project. Jewcology.com is a new web portal for the global Jewish environmental community. Thanks to the [ROI community](#) for their generous support, which made the Jewcology project possible.

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